

The Relevant Gospel

Currently no expression is quite as popular as the word "relevance". We must be relevant. The Christian faith must be made "relevant" lest it won't make any impact upon society.

We have seen different "relevance theologies" wanting to show the non-Christian world that the Christian faith is up-to-date in language and thought. Fortunately, even within the Protestant theological establishment, the cult of relevance is beginning to call forth satire – a sure sign of its waning interest and influence.

Thus Robert McAfee Brown, in a chapter of his *Collected Writings of St. Hereticus* (1974) titled, "*Making the Bible Relevant Biblical Needs and How to Meet Them*," offers a "relevant" retelling of the Easter story: "But on the first day of the week, toward dawn, they arose and went to the garden in convertibles, ranch wagons, and Corvettes, wearing on their persons the spices they had prepared for the occasion. "And behold as the sun burst forth there was a great blast from four trumpets, drawn from the local high school marching band. And at the blast of trumpets, an Easter bunny, wondrous large, stood before them. His appearance was like lightning and his fur was white as snow. And he did carry a sign affixed to his hat bearing the words, "Courtesy of Jones's Department Store".

Brown notes, quite properly, that his contemporary "Scripture lesson" is "sober and straightforward reporting of the various strata of twentieth-century religious insight." The difficulty with the theology of relevance lies with its point of departure. Modern man is taken as normative and not God as He is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Modern theology has engaged in an impossible attempt to adjust the Christian message to the demands of non-Christians. This attempt is not new. It comes on the scene time and time again.

In the 19th century, the German Protestant theologian Schleiermacher taught that it was impossible to formulate a theology that is valid for all times. By basing his theology on experience, he believed to have found a fresh approach that would by-pass some of the objections to Christian dogma raised by his contemporaries. But Schleiermacher believed that the doctrine of the resurrection, the ascension, and the return of Christ in judgment were not essential to Christianity.

Is the gospel still relevant? Let me give some reasons for believing that the old gospel is still relevant for this modern world.

First of all, the reason for believing this is that man himself has not changed. This statement can be proved in many ways. It is an accepted fact, for instance, that great classic literature of the world is considered to be ageless. The reason is that it deals with man as man. It describes the man of every age.

Seneca wrote: "We are all wicked. What one blames in another he will find in his own bosom. We live among the wicked, ourselves being wicked." Shakespeare penned: "Where's that palace where into foul things Sometimes intrude not? Who has a breast so pure, But some uncleanly apprehensions keep leets (meetings in court) and lawdays, and in sessions sit With meditations lawful?"

Dr. Johnson remarked: "Every man knows that of himself which he dare not tell to his dearest friend." Huxley spoke of the "infinite wickedness which has attended the course of human history."

Modern man has succeeded in splitting the atom. He has built expensive and magnificent space ships. He can travel with phenomenal speed. But the truth is that all the sins mentioned in the Bible you will find committed by modern man today. Man's nature has not changed. The Biblical diagnosis that man is sinful is still correct.

The second reason for doing is of vital importance. God hasn't changed. It is absurd to reject the gospel because it is old. God is changeless. Someone has well put this point by saying "Time writes no wrinkle on the brow of the eternal." The laws, the promises, the warnings and the demands as found in Scripture have been given by the eternal and changeless God.

Of course, our problems have a new setting. The environmental crisis, the housing shortage, the threat of global warfare, labour strife and so on are all part of the modern scene. But behind all these problems is man's rebellious attitude to the eternal and holy God. The question still is: "How should man be just with God?".

The ultimate problem is man's relationship to the God who is eternal, holy and changeless. Therefore, the gospel is still up-to-date. It gives God's remedy for the ills of our time.

The third reason for believing the old gospel is that it alone can deal adequately with the problems and the conditions of man and world. Let us be realistic: Acts of Parliament have righted many wrongs. The flight of knowledge has been enormous. Great and even dramatic changes have taken place in this world.

But what are the conditions prevailing today? Men and women in general are unhappy; they feel lost, and have no sense of direction in life. Our Western society has thought that material prosperity and universal education would solve everything. But the facts are that we have an increase in gambling, pornography, broken homes, crimes and unhappy marriages.

Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey;
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

These words are being verified in an alarming rate at the present time.

But there is one cure for the ills of man. Man can be forgiven and find peace with God through Jesus Christ His Son. It is through the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit that I can live today and face my Maker and Judge. The Christian's hope is the Lord who can present him "faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." His happiness is in the Lord of heaven and earth. His purpose in life is to love God and his neighbour as himself. The guidelines for living are firm and sure, as they have been given by the eternal, changeless and perfect God. My conviction is that the gospel message does not need to be made relevant. It is relevant for twentieth century man. As it was up-to-date in the first century so it is up-to-date in this modern space age.

Johan D. tangelder
June, 1973